Interview with Mrs. N.A. Johnson,
Mrs. Elsie Emma, and Mr. Joseph
Conducted by Dr. J.L. Dodson & Ms. Paula Boyer

TAPE #1 - June 1, 1977

DODSON: Now I wonder if you'd tell us your name and how long you've lived in the valley.

EMMA: You've been here since 1912, mother. What is your name?

JOHNSON: Amanda Johnson, I'm Mrs. Johnson.

EMMA: Mrs. N.A. Johnson. ? until just the last few years. Her social security came in.

DODSON: And what year did you come to the valley?

JOHNSON: 1912.

DODSON: Where did you come from by the way?

JOHNSON: Pomona.

DODSON: So you lived in California before you came to the valley.

JOHNSON: I lived in California since. I was 15 years old when I came Sweden.

DODSON: I see. So you've been here all of your life except for 15 years? Well, that's very interesting.

EMMA: When she came at 15 they were from ? Minnesota. And my father was in concrete, a jack of all trades there. And she had three children there. Four children, the first one passed away, so she had four children there. And he would lay streets and built the houses and the gutters and sidewalks and finally one the storms like ? I learned this just last year from my aunt, she resided there. So he give up. He says, "I'm going to Los Angeles. I'm going to California. So three more children were born in Los Angeles. I don't know what he did there, but I imagine it was the same thing. So he give up on that and he went to Pomona and I was born there. And he had this machinery and he built big beautiful homes. The base of them was concrete. Not many termites I don't think is in any of his houses. And the family home stands on Victory Blvd. to date. 14542 Victory Blvd.

DODSON: I probably should say at this point that the second voice you're hearing on the tape is that of Mrs. Emma, who is the daughter of Mrs. Johnson.

EMMA: And according to that name, I was married to Harry M. Wright, who's uncle was one of the founders of the valley too. It was Harry J. Clever. So my husband's grandmother, great grandmother and Mary Jane Keffer. Her father started the Green Sheet. Her great grandmother were cousins. So, therefore, my children are related to Mary Jane Keffer. And her father started the Green Sheet.

DODSON: We know her very well because she is associated with our museum.

EMMA: She's the one that keeps in touch with me. So was the relationship to the grandmother's of two generations back. My children and her children have a connection.

DODSON: Now I think you told us you had lived in the valley since you were two years old.

EMMA: Two years old and I begin to recall when I was four years old. In this garage, that my father had built. It was the first garage in Van Nuys and the reason I

can remember those things is because of all the children, my mother had eleven children. She had the first twins for in Van Nuys in 1912.

BOYER: Both were born at home?

EMMA: Oh everybody...my father was more or less the mid wife. The last baby was delivered by Dr. Canby Sr. At that time we pulled him off horse stock because things were rough. Of course I went to school with son, Charles and everyone was fine with that. But that was the situation and all these years she was scrubbing clothes on a rubbing board and Ellen cooked by wood. So the reason I can recall those episodes about my youth of all her eleven children she raised, she lost three in childhood, in babyhood. I had curly hair and none of the rest of 'em did. My father had curly hair. So my father was a barber in town. He would cut everybody's hair but mine, because I had curly hair. So one day he cut everybody's hair and he didn't cut hair. So I'd go back of this garage on Erwin Street...we had chickens and I'd take a scissors and I'd cut off all my curls. And I'd come back in and my mother is scrubbing clothes on the rubbing board and I'd say, "Mom," mamma we'd call her. She takes one look at me and boy did she start to whack me with that wet hand so

that's why I remember that episode. And then I remember the death of my brother.

BOYER: You were saying that there was a first funeral home? We had heard anything about that.

DODSON: What year would that have been?

EMMA: No. Well, I was four years old so that would have been...I was born 1910.

DODSON: So that's 1914.

EMMA: 1914, but I could remember the period while the baby was sick and there was a couple of aunts there so I would tend along with my mother and they would rock day and night with this baby. And finally I knew it was sick and they told me that it would die. So we took it over to this funeral home which was in furniture store the Mezzanine for a little balcony between...it was situated on the west side of the street.

DODSON: Would you happen to remember the name of the funeral home?

EMMA: No, it was a furniture store.

JOHNSON: Nordvale.

EMMA: Nordvale, was that it? Nordvale, I think. I think that was it but I wasn't sure.

JOHNSON: Yeah, that was...

DODSON: We like to get some the names of these companies.

EMMA: Nordvale. Because they had a son named Donald Nordvale about my name. So this wasn't a regular funeral home but this is where you kept the people...

DODSON: A furniture store with the funeral part attached.

EMMA: Well, up on the mezzanine floor. And this is where you had a funeral then you took the book...took them down to a cemetery. It was called Rose Hills...Rose Bud Cemetery I guess in Los Angeles. Where did you buy that baby, mother?

JOHNSON: My baby in Hollywood Cemetery.

EMMA: In Hollywood Cemetery?

JOHNSON: Like the boy was ? Sawtelle.

EMMA: Yeah, Sawtelle. This boy I'm talking about, my brother. He was buried with Sawtelle Hospital stand because I remember the notification from the cemetery if he wished to take up the remains otherwise it would be a Sawtelle situation. So it was Wilshire Blvd. And I remember that episode. It was in 1914. And it was shortly after that my father decided to give up on Van Nuys and try for Oregon. So he always paid cash for everything and he always bought Buicks. So he packed us all into the Buick and we drive up to Oregon. And I can remember we was out up there with a...mother always had a baby at the breast, every two years, that was first. ? control event. But it didn't seem to be any hassle with us because they just take us and they'd throw a canvas on the ground and we'd all stretch out on the canvas and they'd cover us with a canvas and somehow they managed to feed us. Open an open fire or something. So as we approached the town in Oregon we was wet. The soil was wet, wet and slimy and they left my brother by the highway. He was a boy scout. I'd say 12 to 14 years old, because he had poison oak. And I thought, "That's terrible, leaving my brother there." But they going into town and he was going to look for food. And they said, "Don't worry, he'll be alright, he's a boy scout." So mother you tell about dad

looking for the food in Oregon. Remember when we went to...

JOHNSON: Oh, in Oregon? While we had ? and I lived in Pomona and they lived in...

EMMA: No, in Oregon.

JOHNSON: ? in Oregon. The car that doesn't work was coming to stay with us in Van Nuys so he told him that he could come up and he might get some work up there. So we went up with eight children driving up there. They're sleeping on the ground and there were no roads and no nothing up there. He thought maybe the kids could get some work picking fruit. They only paid us $.15 an hour. So my husband said, "No, let us go back to Van Nuys again." ? "Okay, that's up to you." We drove home.

EMMA: How did he get the food to feed us that time?

JOHNSON: Buy it.

EMMA: What did...you went to the farmer...what did the farmer tell you?

JOHNSON: We were up in the mountain in Oregon. We broke down. My husband was also a mechanic. He went down to the hotel to buy some bread. We didn't buy it from the ? we go to ? we know that ? So the hotel man said, "If you come in the morning, we going to bake tonight. You can look bread tomorrow morning. So we saw our grandson up in the hills there. So he went over there to the woman and she said, "Can we buy some milk for our children." "Well," she said, "The cows come in tonight, you can come back in the morning." So ?

EMMA: Then you came back to Van Nuys?

JOHNSON: No, not at that time. We was travelling way up to Salem, Oregon. ? then he decided to get it and come back.

EMMA: When we came back, where did we go to live mother?

JOHNSON: When he come back?

EMMA: Yes.

JOHNSON: Well, we had...when ? park and put down the canvas ? We slept in Hollywood Park one night with all the children ? We stayed until he ? a place to live.

DODSON: How did you happen to decide to come to Van Nuys instead of going to Hollywood?

JOHNSON: Well, the ? got pretty well filled up in Pomona there. ? and work it wasn't good. So that's when we decided to want to come in to Van Nuys. Of course we was in Los Angeles about...

EMMA: Three, four years maybe.

JOHNSON: Oh, a long time. But she don't know ? work in Los Angeles and also he was ?

DODSON: Now, you mentioned pipe line, didn't you.

EMMA: Irrigation pipe.

DODSON: That's what I was going to ask about. Now that was pre-irrigation?

EMMA: Yes. He was doing this in Pomona and that thing had been all taken care of so there's no future for irrigation pipe there so then he decided to come out to this valley. ?

JOHNSON: Then ? had anything to do with the cement, you know.

DODSON: I see. Then when you came this was mostly farm area.

EMMA: It was desert. Not much farming. It was root fields, bean fields. A Sunday recreation was after they got through stashing beans go out and pick sacks of beans in the afternoon. But my father put in the irrigation systems, which I would say is 1916, 15 or 16, after we came back from Oregon. Then he invented this machine and this place was on Friar Street between Van Nuys Blvd. on the west side and Vesper. And they had bought three lots on Victory Blvd. in the same area.

JOHNSON: On the west side.

EMMA: On the west side. So he was going put the house in the middle, the house is still standing. And we had a lot on each side. One was going to be a plumbing shop for one brother, the other was going to be a garage for the other brother. Because everyone in his family was trained ? everything.

DODSON: Could you give us the address of that house? We're trying to locate old houses in the valley.

(OVERLAPPING)

EMMA: I think, it's the only one left standing that's on that.

JOHNSON: Two story.

EMMA: Yeah, it's on the...

BOYER: Wasn't that across the street from...what's the name of the bank?

(OVERLAPPING)

EMMA: Mom, that's not Lincoln. Manufacturer's Bank.

DODSON: Oh Manufacturer.

EMMA: It's right in the middle of the block between Van Nuys Blvd. and Vesper. Well, this house is much old than that. When I had to come here I was very broken hearted. Thirty years ago.

DODSON: This house we're in now. Is older?

EMMA: Is much older. This is one of the first ranch houses. And at the end of the street, there is another big ranch house, just like this. The doors and everything is identical. When I came here thirty years ago it was still all the apricots. This was all full of apricot and citrus trees and that was the other ranch up there. I don't know who owned that one.

DODSON: Would you know when this house was built?

EMMA: No, I've never gone back to trace it.

(INAUDIBLE)

DODSON: That's pretty unusual.

JOSEPH: ? there was a concrete base on it.

EMMA: Now the house on Victory Blvd., my father always built houses. I could remember in Pomona, going back, it's on a three or four level thing. There's a basement, three or four steps down. One big room, that's a back storage room, where we use to can and with that big of a crowd with kids, everything was blacked as large as you get them. So the one room was just black. So everything was stored in there. But this other section in the basement. She did the washing, there was windows there. He installed a toilet, a shower and everything. It was living quarters down there which some people come and stay they could use. But that's where she scrubbed her clothes and boiled everything. Everything had to be boiled on a little...on the wash boiler until I was 18. So that wa 1928 she never had a washing machine. Raised 11 children in that heavily cemented room. So that place is still in the same condition that my father left it. And every room, there's two little

bedrooms upstairs, a sleeping porch, that we called a sleeping porch. We always slept in open air. So the windows you could raise up in the winter time. So she always had a baby in bed with her. Because she had a baby at the breast. No cribs or anything. The baby ? Babies slept outside in the day time. So she and dad would sleep with the baby. And then at the other end of the sleeping porch there was the twins. Then I had two younger brothers. So there was a foot at one end and a brother at the other and then I had a single cot on the sleeping porch. And it's still just like it was except it's rented out as living quarters. Theirs is rented out as single dwelling, the kitchen...even the front porch which was like this house is rented out to beggars. The living room was rented out, there was 14 rentals on that property that my father had. And he eventually lost it during depression time. And he really died, he died in 1954. And he died, I'd say, with a broken heart.

JOSEPH: ? 1934, '35.

EMMA: No, the next year, '35. '35, he died in 1935. And how I happened to meet Bill, my present husband, in our family anybody new that came to town ? old timers would go to wish them well. Well, across the street

was originally owned by Bailey, the plumber. Have you heard of Bailey's?

DODSON: No.

EMMA: Their daughter is probably still alive. She was my age. But she had a little mental disturbance or something. She wasn't quite a 100 percent.

DODSON: You say Mrs. Bailey is still alive. ?

EMMA: No. Mrs. Bailey had a daughter. On that corner, the north west corner of Van Nuys Blvd. was the pump house. That supplied the water. Now it's shoe stores and a big magazine rack on that corner. So that was originally the pump, one of the pump houses that supplied the water. And Bailey owned that property in the back and they had a little money. Where our family, we was always without money with that many children. So eventually he was able to build this store, this building that is now taken over by Sight & Sound. So after he died there was no one to take over the plumbing shop so eventually the beer can and somebody took it over as a beer place. And then it wouldn't prosper because it was depression then. Nobody even had the five cents for a glass of beer. So it would keep changing hands and

then each family would change hands and mother lived across the street and my husband and I lived on the next block and each time it would change hands we would go in to wish them well, the new owner. But there wasn't any chance of anybody making anything because there was no money. Well, one time we walked past there was white tablecloths on the tables. And we said, "Oh boy, who's coming there now. This will never work." So we go in again to wish the new owners well. It happened that my husband Bill was back next but I met his wife and the other one.

(INAUDIBLE)

JOSEPH: One of them that went in there was the first spaghetti house in the valley.

DODSON: Really?

EMMA: First pizza made in the valley and they couldn't give it away.

JOSEPH: They called me Spaghetti Joe.

DODSON: Well, you were the one that told them to eat spaghetti here in the valley, huh?

(OVERLAPPING)

JOHNSON: After my husband died I took up the complex ? on the business as a pool man after he's gone. Because I had three children in school yet. And then he took my two boys in the service. All my boys our in the service.

EMMA: She managed to carry on the business after my father died with the help of the two younger brothers and the older brother. ? to wash up the boys.

DODSON: And that would have been World War II.

EMMA: So then everything went.

JOHNSON: Because at that time there was no work to be given people in summer time. ? good work for me when your $.25 an hour.

EMMA: Yeah, $.25 an hour. But with Joe and his plumbing shop he came from Boston thinking he was going raise chickens or something. I don't know. Then he was going...

JOSEPH: ? I lost my ? on Gaviota ? so I decided to work ? and get rid of my chickens by cooking and selling then. I was going to give them away. Everybody wanted that beer because the beer had just come in.

EMMA: For five cents. But not anybody had the five cents. So we got it cleared so we can ? And then every weekend, at that time, if you had sold his liquor you had to have popcorn or something on the counter. So every weekend the end of that counter was full of all the ? cuts, all the fresh vegetables you could eat. Beer was five cents a glass. A glass of whiskey was ten cents. And I'm talker, so I was around town telling everybody, "Meet new the owner in Bailey's Plumbing Shop." I hadn't met him yet, but I said, "You can go there. You can all you want to eat free. And if you had five cents, you can buy yourself a glass of beer. If you don't have five cents, that isn't necessary. From that time on until we quit business in 1949, all the meals to the old timers was free. At Christmas, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years.

JOSEPH: (INAUDIBLE) I couldn't get anybody because they were moving in. So finally I got ? And I figured by giving food away, because it was during depression, we use to get a lot of families. Children hitting the road from New York to San Francisco. So we use to get quite a few for meals. ? anybody comes in this door, eat it.

DODSON: Well, how were you able to keep going when you're giving away free food at a time like that?

JOSEPH: Free, but I made it just by advertising. All the people that want to drink beer and they spend a little time on the weekends ?

EMMA: That's where the farmers came on Saturday night. If you come to town, that was the time to dress up and come to town.

(INAUDIBLE)

EMMA: Until 1949.

JOSEPH: I didn't even advertise.

DODSON: Well, you had the first spaghetti place in Van Nuys.

JOSEPH: We use to go to all the openings to anybody that use to open ? to wish them well. But there wasn't one in the valley that sold spaghetti.

EMMA: They called it Joe's Spaghetti House.

DODSON: I see. What year then was it that you organized spaghetti house?

JOSEPH: 1934 and '35. ? '39 and then I built my own place on ? street. ?

DODSON: Were you one of the first to open a place selling beer after prohibition was legal?

JOSEPH: One of the first. There was the Oasis.

EMMA: And the Brass ?

JOSEPH: ? hotel in Van Nuys. ?

EMMA: Alice Blugan.

(INAUDIBLE)

DODSON: How did spaghetti go over the valley when you first opened?

JOSEPH: People had to eat and you could buy spaghetti ?

DODSON: How many pounds for a dollar, wholesale.